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DOI:

[10.1093/analys/anv051](https://doi.org/10.1093/analys/anv051)

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Littlejohn, C. M. (2015). Knowledge and Awareness. *ANALYSIS*, 75(4), 596-603.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/analys/anv051>

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Knowledge and Awareness

Clayton Littlejohn

[Forthcoming in *Analysis* as part of a symposium on Pritchard's *Epistemological Disjunctivism*.]

Introduction

Pritchard defends an account of perceptual knowledge according to which this knowledge is knowledge you have in virtue of having *factive* and *reflectively accessible* rational support for your perceptual beliefs (2012: 13). Pritchard's proposal combines internalist and externalist elements and seeks to capture the insights of these rival approaches. His view is internalist insofar as he thinks of the rational support our perceptual beliefs have as one that is reflectively accessible. His view is externalist insofar as it characterizes the rational support you have when you know, say, that there's an owl on the branch outside your window as *factive*. This rational support isn't cobbled together out of conditions common to the case of perception and hallucination, so perceptual contact with things in your surroundings confers upon you a kind of epistemic benefit you cannot receive when it merely seems to you that you see an owl. Pritchard deftly fends off a variety of objections to his proposal. It's clear that his view emerges as superior to most of its rivals. In spite of the book's many virtues, I think a serious difficulty arises for his view. I don't think there's any internalist insight here to capture.

There seem to be three main intuitions that tempt people to go internalist or incorporate internalist elements into their theories of knowledge: the notorious *new evil genius* intuition (i.e., the intuition that everything that matters to justification or rationality is common to the best cases and the cases of systematic deception), the *ability* intuition (i.e., the intuition that it matters whether the accuracy your beliefs is attributable to you or your cognitive abilities), and the *responsibility* intuition.¹ Pritchard's motivation for introducing the internalist element into his proposal has nothing to do with the first two intuitions. It's the third that does the work:

... a fundamental difficulty for epistemic externalist positions ... is that it is hard on this view to capture any adequate notion of epistemic responsibility. For if the facts in virtue of which one's beliefs enjoy a good epistemic standing are not reflectively available to one, then in what sense is one even able to take epistemic responsibility for that epistemic standing (2012: 2)?

To vindicate this intuition about responsibility, Pritchard proposes something along the lines of this thesis:

Reflective Access: In knowing that *p*, your belief about *p* is supported by reflectively accessible reasons.

On a natural reading of Reflective Access, a necessary precondition on coming to know *p* is the possession of accessible reasons. Notice that these reasons aren't (just) reasons why you believe *p*; rather, they are *your reasons* for believing *p* and they are *good* reasons for believing *p*. It might seem quite natural to think that a subject's reasons have to satisfy an access constraint since a subject's reasons for ϕ -

¹ Pritchard rejects the first (2012: 38) and doesn't rely on the second, although he accepts it (2009).

ing have to capture the light in which the subject ϕ 'd. And it might seem quite natural to think that beliefs constitute knowledge, in part, by being based on good reasons. In spite of whatever initial plausibility Reflective Access has, I think that it's deeply problematic.

Access and Awareness

Some writers treat access as if it's a kind of awareness.² I'll follow suit. Access is a technical notion, but awareness seems like the kind of non-technical notion that we might invoke without having to first provide clear guidance about what it amounts to. If we treat access as a kind of awareness, we could say that knowledge requires a kind of awareness of that which constitutes the rational basis for the relevant pieces of knowledge. If the rational basis of our beliefs is constituted by facts or true propositions, the relevant kind of awareness-of would just be awareness-that. If, however, the rational basis of our beliefs is constituted by something else (e.g., states of mind, states of affairs, events, substances, tropes), it might be that the relevant kind of awareness is awareness-of that is *not* awareness-that.³

Let's start with awareness-of. Someone can be aware of things of all sorts, but I think it's helpful to distinguish between awareness of something that instances generalities and awareness of something that involves generality. If you're aware of the ticking of the clock, the cat in the corner, or the throbbing pain in your foot, everything you're aware of is particular. Being aware of such things doesn't involve bringing them under any sort of generality and representing them as being instances of things that could have been instanced on other occasions or in other ways. Because of this, it's difficult to see how this sort of awareness could play the kind of epistemic role required by Reflective Access. You could be aware of the cat in the corner even if it was disguised to look like a dog. You could be aware of a tapping at the window that you thought wasn't coming from the window but was part of the movie you were watching. In being aware of coarse-grained particulars (e.g., substances or events), this relation of awareness doesn't play any role in determining how confident you could reasonably be in believing something to be true.⁴ As a general constraint on the things that play the rational support role in the way reasons are alleged to, it better be that there cannot be significant differences in what it's rational to believe or be confident of between pairs of cases in which your reasons are identical. Since there can be radical differences in what's rational to believe where you're aware of the very same coarse-grained particulars, awareness of such particulars cannot be what the possession of reasons consists in.

This rules out a certain reading of Pritchard's proposal. We shouldn't think of perceptual knowledge as a matter of being aware of a certain kind of mental event, one that can be correctly described as an experience as of an owl or correctly described as seeing an owl.⁵ If we have one event that can be brought under multiple descriptions (i.e., an event in which one sees something or seems to see something), we'd need to know what description the subject brought the event under to determine whether her further beliefs would be rational or justified. If

² See Bergmann (2006) and Madison (2014), for example.

³ For arguments that the rational basis consists of facts or true propositions, see Hyman (1999) and Williamson (2000). For arguments that it consists of something like attitudes, mental events, or states of mind, see Conee and Feldman (2008, 2011), Mitova (forthcoming), and Turri (2009).

⁴ See Neta (2008).

⁵ Mind you, Pritchard doesn't intend his proposal to be read this way.

conceived of merely as an experience of a certain kind, it seems that it's rational force would be quite different to the experience that's conceived of as one in which a subject sees something. Thus, the story that Pritchard tells has to involve more than simply awareness of an experience that's an experience in which a subject sees something; rather, the subject has to take this experience to be one in which she sees something.

Some awareness-of is just awareness-that. The obvious case is that of being aware of a fact. There is no difference between being aware of the fact that oil prices are slumping and being aware that oil prices are slumping. This case differs from the previous cases of awareness-of in that it involves awareness of something general (i.e., something that is an instance of slumping). My hunch is that any awareness-of that involves awareness of something general will involve the exercise of conceptual capacities. (This would account for the fact that we're not dealing with extensional contexts.) Because of the exercise of such capacities, such awareness will have a more obvious epistemic impact as the exercise of such capacities will involve representing something as falling under a generality (or failing to fall under one). Such representations will have a direct bearing on how rational it would be to be confident that something is so. If, say, you and your friend were both aware that it was an owl on the branch or aware of the fact that it is an owl on the branch (and not merely aware of an owl), it couldn't be rational for you to be agnostic about whether there were owls in the area.

What should we say about awareness of things like the arrangement of furniture in a room, the position of your limbs, or a thing's shape, color, or texture? It's not hard to imagine how someone might be aware of the chair, say, without being aware that it is a chair. (Think about stumbling around in the dark when you feel the thing but don't yet know what it is.) It's harder to imagine how someone could be aware of the arrangement of furniture in a room without being aware that the chair is here and the table is over there. It's hard to see how someone could be aware of the table's shape without being aware that it is rectangular. If these are, as I strongly suspect, instances of awareness-that, then it seems that this is another kind of awareness-of that will involve the exercise of conceptual capacities and will have a kind of direct significance when it comes to what's rational or reasonable for the subject to believe. If you're aware of the table's shape and the table is rectangular, you cannot be agnostic about whether it's circular. If, however, you're aware of the table but not aware of its shape, such agnosticism might well be understandable.

If we put these points together, the kind of awareness that we'd have to have to something for it to rationally constrain our beliefs is awareness-that, not awareness-of that is not, *inter alia*, awareness-that. And this gives rise to a worry when we think about the way that Reflective Access connects knowledge and awareness. When I asked initially about the relationship between knowledge and awareness, the question was about whether awareness of reasons might be a precondition on coming to know. I now want to ask a different question: might the awareness that figures in Reflective Access just be knowledge? It seems pretty clear that some awareness-of is not. It's hard to see any interesting connection between being aware of a tapping sound or a chair and knowledge that something is the case. What about knowledge and awareness-that? Both are factive. Both involve the exercise of conceptual capacities. Both involve registering that things are a certain way in a way that goes beyond mere perception (i.e., you cannot both be aware that housing prices are continuing to rise and not be right about what's happening with housing prices).

Consider, then, the following hypothesis:

Identity: You are aware that p iff you know that p .

If Identity is correct, Reflective Access generates a vicious regress. According to Reflective Access, if you know p , your belief about p is supported by reflectively accessible reasons where these reasons consist of facts that you're aware of. Your reason for believing p cannot be p itself, so there must be some further fact that you're aware of, p' , that provides rational support for believing p . But, according to Identity, to be aware of p' is just to know p' . To know p' , Reflective Access requires more rational support, support that consists of awareness of some yet further fact, p'' . Identity tells us that this awareness is yet more knowledge. This carries on *ad infinitum*.⁶

One might respond by distinguishing access from awareness, but one cannot simply claim that they're distinct without offering some suggestion as to what access to a fact might be if it didn't involve awareness of it. Since the regress gets started so long as being aware of the fact that p is required for having access to the fact that p , this isn't a helpful line of response.

One might respond instead by challenging the idea that the relevant kind of awareness is awareness of facts, but I've explained above why awareness-of that doesn't involve awareness-that cannot be understood as awareness of something that provides rational support for a belief. Perhaps it's true that many internalists would try to avoid the regress in this way, but perhaps it's also true that these internalists are confused.

To block the regress, one could argue that the awareness needn't be of a *further* fact. At some point, the suggestion might be, you know p without being aware of some further fact. This is a very good suggestion, but I don't see how we could square this with Reflective Access. The idea behind Reflective Access is that the awareness relates you to something that provides rational support for believing p by being eligible for being your reason for believing p . What plays this role, presumably, would be something that could convince you that p . The fact that it's raining doesn't seem to be the kind of thing that could convince you that it's raining, so it's hard to see how it could play the role required by Reflective Access.

Pritchard doesn't propose that your reason for believing p could be p itself. He thinks that in the perceptual case, your belief that, say, there's an owl on the branch is supported by some further fact: the fact that you see that it's an owl. To combat the regress worry, he might pursue one of two responses. He might reject Identity or he might reject Reflective Access. Let's consider these responses in turn.

Some authors have attacked Identity on the grounds that a perceptual belief that fails to constitute knowledge because of environmental luck might nevertheless constitute awareness-that because of the perceptual link between the subject and things in her surroundings (McGlynn 2014).⁷ This sort of attack on Identity wouldn't suit Pritchard's purposes, however. Awareness-that is supposed to ensure that the subject is in a position to know. Pritchard might suggest that awareness-that differs from knowledge insofar as only knowledge requires belief. This would solve the regress problem, but I don't think it's very plausible. To be

⁶ This regress worry doesn't just arise for proponents of Reflective Access, but also for those who, like Fumerton (1995), see a kind of access (acquaintance, in Fumerton's case) to something that involves generality as a necessary precondition for possessing knowledge.

⁷ For an argument that environmental luck cases don't involve awareness of the relevant facts, see Littlejohn (2014).

aware that, say, this cheese is a washed-rind cheese, you'd have to exercise conceptual capacities that aren't exercised in anything like perceptual experience. The exercise of these capacities is distinctive of belief, so belief has to be part of awareness-that.

If Identity isn't the weak link in the regress argument, we might take another look at Reflective Access. We can block the regress by restricting Reflective Access so that reflectively accessible reasons are required only for certain kinds of knowledge. So long as the knowledge that you see that *p* isn't itself knowledge that requires the support from some further reflectively accessible reason, this would stop the regress. This move doesn't come without costs, however.

First, recall the motivation for Reflective Access was the desire to capture an internalist insight. If Reflective Access were restricted so that it applies only to certain kinds of knowledge, the resultant account would face just the sort of problem that Pritchard thinks arises for externalism. If Reflective Access is rejected for self-knowledge or perceptual knowledge, say, it might seem then that the subject couldn't take epistemic responsibility for having those beliefs that attain the good epistemic standing.

Second, if Reflective Access is restricted to stop the regress, it has to be restricted for the right reason. Suppose that we agree that Reflective Access captures an important insight into inferential knowledge but leads to a distorted picture of self-knowledge. How should we decide whether perceptual knowledge is the kind of knowledge that requires support from accessible reasons? If it doesn't, Pritchard's epistemological disjunctivism would give us a distorted picture of perceptual knowledge for it would suggest, mistakenly, that such knowledge gets to be knowledge because of the rational support of reasons.⁸

The easiest way out of the difficulty is simply to reject Reflective Access. There is presently a debate about the ontology of reasons between parties who (mistakenly) think of reasons as states of mind or mental events and parties who (correctly) think of reasons as facts where both sides mistakenly think that the key to understanding how beliefs attain positive epistemic standing is by being supported by reasons. Whatever else reasons are supposed to be, they're thought of as something like a sign, indicator, or clue which is available to the subject and that could lead rationally to the formation of a belief. If we choose our examples correctly, we'll quickly see that the possibility of knowledge doesn't turn on whether there are available supporting reasons because we'll see that there are perfectly good cases of knowledge without clues. Anscombe (1962) told us where to look for such cases. The knowledge that you have of the position of your own limbs is knowledge, but the beliefs that constitute knowledge don't count as rationally held because we can work out where our limbs are by relying on some clues. If your legs are crossed and you know it, you don't work out which leg is on top of the other by consulting a feeling, a tickle, or a sensation that's a clue to how your legs are positioned. There's a story to tell about how this knowledge is possible, but when we say, 'You know this because...' we don't fill in the dots by identifying the clues you relied on or the reasons that persuaded you.

It's clear that there are differences between observational knowledge and the knowledge that you have of the position of your own limbs. If Anscombe is right, the latter is not observational. Still, the example is instructive. If there are examples of knowledge without clues there must be a mistake in the argument for

⁸ For arguments that perceptual belief isn't based on reasons, see Littlejohn (forthcoming) and McGinn (2012).

Reflective Access. The mistake is to think that the key to understanding how beliefs can be responsibly held or be things we're held responsible for holding is to think of all beliefs that constitute knowledge as being held for reasons. There are intentional actions we can rightly be held responsible for that aren't things that were done for reasons (e.g., things like idly doodling, emotional action, or action done on false beliefs), so I don't think that being motivated by reasons can be the key to understanding responsibility. Actions and attitudes can, for example, be responsive to reasons even when there's nothing that was the agent's reason for forming those attitudes or performing those actions, so the key to understanding the responsibility we bear for our actions and attitudes must be understood in other terms.⁹ Once we see that, we can see that the internalist idea that motivates Reflective Access isn't an internalist insight. And once we can see that, we can free ourselves from the assumptions that give rise to the regress problem that causes so much trouble for Reflective Access.

Conclusion

My main complaint about Pritchard's proposal is that it makes the mistake of trying to incorporate the internalist idea that knowledge comes from a kind of awareness of things that provide rational support for our beliefs. Knowledge doesn't get to be that way by being a belief supported by something further that you're aware of. Not in every case, at any rate. Knowledge *is* awareness. It's the fundamental kind of awareness of things like facts that involve generality. Since the only awareness that relates us to reasons *is* knowledge, the internalist cannot help us understand where knowledge comes from.¹⁰

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⁹ See Alvarez (2010) and Heuer (2014) for discussion of this point and criticism of the idea that intentional actions are intentional because they're done for reasons. I should add that the case of error is an interesting case here. Some of us would argue that in the case of systematic delusion, there's nothing that's the subject's reason, say, for believing falsely that there's an owl on the branch. Still, the subject bears responsibility for her beliefs and we can think of the belief as responsibly held. To think that this is down to the fact that the subject's belief is based on reasons is to retreat to a kind of internalism about reasons in the bad case. That's an option that Pritchard could pursue, but it's a deeply problematic one for reasons that Alvarez helpfully outlines.

¹⁰ For helpful discussion of these issues, I want to thank Maria Alvarez, Sandy Goldberg, John Hawthorne, Jennifer Hornsby, Ram Neta, and Duncan Pritchard.

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